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Invitation letter

DIGITAL SPORTS MARKETING IN SERBIA: CRM PERSONALIZATION AND CONSUMER PURCHASING DECISIONS

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Abstract: The paper examines the impact of personalized digital marketing in sports – implemented through CRM systems (email campaigns, club mobile applications, and loyalty programs) – on consumer behavior and brand perception. Building on theories of consumer value, customer relationship management, and fan engagement models, the study proposes a framework in which personalization (message relevance, timeliness, and consistency) influences perceived communication usefulness, emotional engagement, and trust, which in turn strengthen satisfaction, loyalty, and purchase intention (tickets, season passes, merchandise, OTT subscriptions). At the same time, boundary effects such as privacy sensitivity, perceived fairness of data exchange (value-for-data), and message fatigue are explored. The proposed research framework integrates measures of CRM touchpoint quality (e.g., dynamic content, behavior-based recommendations) with consumer behavior and brand equity indicators, allowing for the testing of mediating and moderating relationships. Expected findings indicate that well-timed, transparent, and value-driven personalization increases engagement and conversion, while excessive frequency and insufficient data control diminish effects. The theoretical contribution lies in linking CRM personalization with loyalty formation mechanisms in the sports context, while the practical contribution provides guidelines for designing privacy-by-design campaigns, optimizing segmentation, and measuring impacts on purchasing behavior and brand equity.

Keywords: personalization, CRM in sports, consumer behavior, loyalty and engagement, data privacy

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Introduction

The digital transformation of the sports industry has fundamentally changed the way clubs, leagues, and sponsors create, deliver, and measure value for fans and consumers. Today's sports consumers move across a dense network of interconnected touchpoints—from social media and club mobile applications, through email communications and loyalty programs, to online ticket sales and OTT platforms. In such an environment, customer experience is understood as a dynamic process encompassing the entire customer journey, in which the performance of each individual touchpoint cumulatively shapes overall brand perception and purchasing behavior (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

This paradigm amplifies the importance of personalized strategies, in which Customer Relationship Management (CRM) functions as the “backbone” for data collection, integration, and activation. Contemporary CRM extends beyond software solutions; it represents a process-oriented and strategic commitment that synchronizes segmentation, contact management, offer design, and customer value measurement (Payne & Frow, 2005). The conceptual framework of “strategic CRM” emphasizes data integration and multichannel coherence as prerequisites for effective personalization—that is, ensuring that the message, the offer, and the timing of delivery are aligned with the individual's needs and contextual circumstances.

In retail and service industries, the evolution from multichannel to omnichannel management of touchpoints implies that channels are no longer viewed in isolation, but rather as components of a unified system designed to deliver a seamless experience (Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). In sport, this practically means integrating data from club applications, email communications, POS and ticketing systems, loyalty programs, and social media into a single fan view, thereby enabling personalized content, offers, and incentives that influence purchasing habits and brand value.

The theoretical foundations for understanding the effects of such interventions are rooted in marketing and sport management research. On the one hand, the concept of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) suggests that strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in memory stimulate positive responses to brand marketing activities (Keller, 1993). On the other hand, sport-specific consumer behavior models, such as the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), describe the progression of fan attachment from awareness to attraction, attachment, and loyalty; personalization can accelerate movement along this continuum by activating relevant motives and routines (Funk & James, 2001).

Empirical research demonstrates that the adoption and use of branded mobile applications can increase future spending and purchase frequency, partly due to the

constant availability of personalized information, offers, and benefits (Kim, Wang, & Malthouse, 2015; Liu, Lobschat, & Verhoef, 2019). These effects also emerge through enhanced web interactions and higher responsiveness to promotions, aligning with the logic of omnichannel reinforcement (Wang, Malthouse, & Krishnamurthi, 2020).

Personalization in email communication—as a traditional CRM channel—also yields measurable benefits. Randomized field experiments show that even non-informative personalization (e.g., mentioning a recipient's name in the subject line) increases open and conversion rates while reducing unsubscribe behavior, indicating that perceived relevance is a key underlying mechanism (Sahni, Wheeler, & Chintagunta, 2018). At the same time, the literature on triggered messages and marketing automation highlights that timeliness and contextual relevance (e.g., abandoned carts, browsing ticket or seating pages) further amplify the effects of personalized campaigns.

Loyalty programs in sport—ranging from traditional point-based schemes to digital “fan identification” systems—serve as infrastructures for data collection and behavioral rewards. Synthetic reviews suggest that loyalty programs, on average, increase purchasing behavior over time, although their effectiveness depends on program design and customer segmentation; consequently, personalized reward rules and communication strategies maximize returns (Dorotic, Verhoef, & Bijmolt, 2012). In the context of sports brands, team brand equity is closely linked to economic outcomes, implying that personalized CRM initiatives may indirectly influence revenues by strengthening brand associations and loyalty (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005).

Social media have additionally become a central component of the CRM ecosystem in sport, enabling dialogue, content co-creation, and shared rituals that foster extra-role fan behaviors and deeper engagement (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014). Fan engagement is associated with greater tolerance of performance fluctuations, cooperation with management, and prosocial behaviors—important antecedents of loyalty and purchasing outcomes (Yoshida et al., 2014; McDonald et al., 2022).

Although the benefits of personalization are well documented, issues of privacy and fairness in data processing remain critical. The “personalization–privacy paradox” suggests that willingness to share personal data is contingent upon transparency and the perceived value of the exchange (Awad & Krishnan, 2006). In Europe, the implementation of personalized CRM activities must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), particularly with regard to lawful processing bases, information obligations, and data subject rights. In sports practice, this entails clear consent mechanisms, preference management, and data minimization as core principles (EU, 2016/679).

Literature Review

Existing research indicates that personalization in digital sports marketing has evolved from simple demographic segmentation toward predictive and generative AI systems that dynamically select content, offers, and the timing of message delivery (Herold, Singh, Feodoroff, & Breuer, 2024; Weippert, Slivko, Wengler, & Sigala, 2024). In the sports context, the central challenge lies in aligning commercial objectives—such as ticket sales, merchandise, subscriptions, and memberships—with the preservation of fan relationships and the integrity of the club or league brand. Recent empirical evidence suggests that personalized messages and digital engagement practices influence purchase intentions, while also revealing clear limits to these effects due to message fatigue, privacy perceptions, and contextual factors (e.g., in-game versus out-of-game situations) (Steiner, Pittman, & Boatwright, 2023; Nobile & Cantoni, 2023; Miller, Lukic, & Skiera, 2024/2025).

Herold and colleagues (2024) demonstrate that machine-learning models, including those incorporating biometric signals, can predict consumer responses to dynamic sports media messages with very high accuracy, and that optimization of creative content and placement leads to statistically significant improvements in outcomes (e.g., click-through and engagement probabilities). This finding is important because it reinforces the argument that “fine-tuned” personalization—integrating content, timing, and channel—is a key mechanism through which CRM influences fan behavior (Herold et al., 2024).

At the level of user behavior, Steiner, Pittman, and Boatwright (2023) find that different types of social media activities (e.g., following scores, commenting, posting) predict purchase intention differently depending on context. During live events, informational behaviors are most influential, whereas outside the game context, activities related to cultivating fan identity exert stronger effects. These results support the design of CRM flows that personalize content according to situational context (in-game versus out-of-game) (Steiner et al., 2023).

Recent empirical mapping of digital engagement practices within club communities shows that fan behaviors can be classified into multiple types (e.g., informational, ritualistic, collaborative), with each type contributing differently to brand value and conversion outcomes (Stegmann, Ströbel, & Woratschek, 2024). By extending understanding of what fans do and how they do it in online environments, this research provides a foundation for personalization based on habits and social practices rather than solely on demographic characteristics (Stegmann et al., 2024).

The adoption of fan experience applications as key CRM hubs depends on a balance of “reasons for” and “reasons against,” derived from Behavioral Reasoning Theory. Per-

ceived usefulness, habit, and gamification elements foster usage intentions, whereas privacy concerns and complexity inhibit adoption (Uhrich, 2022). Uhrich (2022) shows that these cognitive evaluations mediate the relationship between technological innovation and spectator behavior, with direct implications for personalized push and email flows, in-app offers, and app-based loyalty programs.

A meta-analysis covering 40 years of loyalty programs (Belli, O'Rourke, Carrillat, Pupovac, Melnyk, & Napolova, 2022) indicates that such programs reliably increase behavioral loyalty (e.g., purchase or participation frequency), whereas shifts in attitudinal loyalty are more difficult to achieve and strongly depend on reward design and industry context. In sport, this implies that personalized, experiential, and gamified elements (e.g., privileges linked to teams or players) are more likely to enhance long-term fan value than flat monetary incentives (Belli et al., 2022).

Beyond direct CRM effects, recent studies emphasize that brand perceptions in sport are formed within relational, reputational, and self-identification frameworks. Mishra, Yousaf, and Gannon (2024) show that team reputation functions as a strategic source of brand equity through relationship satisfaction and commitment, suggesting that personalization should highlight reputational dimensions (e.g., heritage, fan-oriented values) to maximize its impact on brand value.

Broader marketing research suggests that the intensity of personalization within omnichannel customer journeys increases relevance and effectiveness, while simultaneously elevating the risk of negative reactions when perceived consumer control is low (Weippert et al., 2024). Systematic reviews and empirical studies indicate that combinations of human and technological personalization—such as intelligent integration of email, mobile applications, and physical points of sale—are the most effective (Weippert et al., 2024).

More recent evidence also shows that personalization in email marketing is not uniformly effective. Its impact depends on the form and intensity of personalization, as well as the congruence between the message and the existing brand–consumer relationship (Nobile & Cantoni, 2023). Certain forms, particularly overly intrusive personalization, may reduce engagement or provoke resistance (Nobile & Cantoni, 2023).

In Europe, the techno-regulatory environment—particularly the post-GDPR regime governing cookies and tracking technologies—has altered the “raw material” of personalization, resulting in reduced availability of third-party data and a stronger reliance on first-party CRM sources (Miller et al., 2024/2025). Recent analyses of tracking practices document a decline in third-party trackers on European websites and technical adaptations by platforms, while advertising research cautions that AI-driven personalization must balance relevance with consumer autonomy. Perceptions

of excessive algorithmic agency can undermine user experience and behavioral intentions (Miller et al., 2024/2025; Nobile & Cantoni, 2023).

Personalization through CRM in Sports Marketing: Opportunities and Challenges

Contemporary CRM in sport integrates first-party data (memberships, ticket purchases, app usage) and omnichannel touchpoints to enable personalized communications and offers delivered at the “right moment.” Generative and predictive AI facilitate hyper-personalization of content (dynamic recommendations, real-time in-game messaging), accelerating the path from engagement to conversion while simultaneously intensifying requirements for transparent data processing and control over message frequency (Westerbeek, 2025; Dubé, 2025). Meta-analytic evidence from broader markets indicates that omnichannel coordination is more effective than isolated channels; however, excessive “intensity” of personalization increases the risk of fatigue and resistance, particularly when users lack a sense of control (The Effectiveness of Omnichannel Strategy, 2025). In parallel, growing restrictions on third-party trackers and the strengthening of privacy regimes are pushing organizations toward first-party strategies (e.g., club apps, loyalty/membership programs) as the foundation of legitimate and sustainable personalization (Ham, 2025). On social media, research warns that content fatigue can erode the effects of personalization when brand messages appear intrusive or overly frequent, necessitating careful calibration and contextual relevance (Fernandes & Moreira, 2024). In sum, opportunities for personalization in sport (higher engagement, conversions, lifetime value) coexist with challenges (fatigue, perceptions of surveillance, regulatory compliance), making privacy-by-design and reliance on first-party data key prerequisites for sustainable CRM practice (Ham, 2025; Dubé, 2025; Westerbeek, 2025).

In practical terms, effective CRM-based personalization does not depend solely on technological capacity, but primarily on the quality of organizational data integration and internal processes. Sports organizations that establish a unified fan view—integrating marketing, sales, public relations, and customer support—achieve greater communication consistency and reduce the risk of contradictory or overloading messages (Dašić, Baltazarević, & Stanković, 2025). In this context, CRM becomes not only a marketing automation tool, but also a governance platform for managing relationships with key stakeholders, particularly fans as carriers of both symbolic and economic value in sport.

A specific challenge concerns balancing commercial efficiency with the preservation of the authenticity of the sports experience. Unlike traditional consumer industries, sport

is grounded in strong emotional bonds, identity, and a sense of belonging. Excessive or poorly calibrated personalization can undermine this relationship, transforming the fan from an active participant into an object of marketing targeting. Consequently, contemporary practice increasingly emphasizes value-based personalization—communication that offers not merely the “right offer,” but meaningful content aligned with context, season phase, sporting results, and the socio-cultural framework of the audience (Vuković, Urošević, & Dašić, 2023; Pavlović & Marković, 2025).

The ethical dimension of personalization carries particular weight in sport, where fans are often willing to share data due to emotional attachment to a club or athlete. This asymmetry of trust imposes heightened responsibility on organizations regarding the collection, processing, and use of data (Dašić, 2023; Mladenović, 2025). Transparency, clearly defined purposes, and the possibility of active choice become key factors in maintaining the legitimacy of CRM systems. Accordingly, personalization is increasingly viewed less as a technical issue and more as a managerial and ethical question within corporate communications in sport.

The Impact of Personalized Digital Strategies on Consumer Behavior in Serbia

Although empirical studies focused specifically on the Serbian market are still emerging, relevant findings from European and global contexts reveal mechanisms that are transferable to the local sports ecosystem. First, transparency of personalization has dual effects: clear messages about data processing can simultaneously increase perceptions of transparency and feelings of “surveillance,” meaning that the ultimate effect on attitudes and advertising effectiveness depends on balancing these two mechanisms (Lee, Moon, & Song, 2024). Second, privacy concerns and digital fatigue encourage avoidance of personalized advertising and reduced platform usage; therefore, in sports CRM it is crucial to calibrate message frequency and provide users with clear control mechanisms (Zhou & Kim, 2024; Neves et al., 2024). Third, omnichannel experience influences consumer intentions and behavior: factors such as perceived convenience, channel integration, and simplicity of the customer journey significantly shape experience and subsequent purchasing outcomes—indicating that sports organizations in Serbia should prioritize seamless integration of ticketing, apps, email, and POS systems (Khalid et al., 2024). Fourth, the EU/EEA regulatory framework (GDPR) indirectly affects local practices as well: evidence shows that GDPR alters tracker usage and business performance, pushing markets toward first-party data and greater transparency—a direction relevant for Serbian clubs working with European partners (Jelovčan et al., 2024). Finally, in the sports domain, synthetic reviews indicate

that digital strategies (social media, mobile channels) positively influence brand loyalty, provided that content is contextually relevant and perceived as fair in terms of data use—a recommendation applicable to local clubs and leagues (Alghizzawi, Habes, & Hailat, 2024). For Serbia, this practically implies a focus on first-party data (memberships/apps), transparent privacy messaging, preference controls, and omnichannel integration as levers to enhance purchase intentions, frequency, and spending value.

In the Serbian context, the impact of personalized digital strategies on consumer behavior in sport can be understood primarily through a shift in decision-making logic—from impulsive purchasing toward the evaluation of the perceived value of the relationship. Consumers increasingly respond less to isolated promotional messages and more to the overall interaction experience with the sports brand. In this sense, personalization acts as a cognitive framework that simplifies choice, reduces information overload, and creates a sense of relevance. In markets such as Serbia, where resources are limited and choices are more deliberate, personalized strategies have the potential to influence not so much immediate purchases as the formation of stable habits of following, engagement, and gradual increases in spending (Mihić et al., 2023; Ilievska Kostadinović & Kostadinović, 2025).

At the same time, personalized digital strategies affect the emotional dimension of consumer behavior, which is particularly salient in sport. Fan behavior is not based solely on rational assessments of price and utility, but on feelings of belonging, identification, and affective attachment to a club or athlete. When personalization is oriented toward recognizing these motives—through contextually adapted content, temporal alignment of messages, and symbolic communication elements—it can strengthen emotional loyalty and deepen the brand relationship (Dašić et al., 2024; Pavlović et al., 2025). Conversely, reducing personalization to purely commercial stimuli risks undermining the authenticity of the sports relationship and weakening the affective capital that is crucial for long-term consumer behavior (Trkulja et al., 2025; Kostadinović & Ilievska Kostadinović, 2025).

Conclusion

Building on the preceding analysis, the scientific and practical contribution of this study is twofold. First, it integrates insights from general marketing scholarship (CRM, omnichannel strategy, customer-based brand equity, and the customer journey) with sport management perspectives (the Psychological Continuum Model and fan engagement) into a unified framework for examining consumer behavior in sport in the era of digital personalization. Second, the empirical focus on three of the most prevalent CRM levers in sport—personalized email communication, club mobile applications, and loyalty

programs—enables the testing of their effects on two key outcome dimensions: (a) purchasing habits (transaction frequency and value) and (b) brand perception (brand associations, loyalty, and brand equity). In doing so, the study addresses a recognized gap in the sport literature, where channels have often been examined in isolation rather than as coordinated components of a CRM-based omnichannel system (Verhoef et al., 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Ultimately, the implementation of personalized CRM campaigns in sports organizations should be understood as a continuum—ranging from strategy formulation and data governance, through offer and creative design, to impact measurement—in which scientifically grounded principles that have proven effective in related industries must be tested and adapted to the specificities of sports consumption and fan identity. Such a perspective enables not only revenue growth and improved return on investment, but also the long-term strengthening of the fan–club relationship, which constitutes the essence of sports marketing in the era of digital personalization (Payne & Frow, 2005; Yoshida et al., 2014).

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